

Approved February 15, 2023

**Advisory Committee Meeting
Zoom Video Conference
February 8, 2023, 6:30 p.m.**

Those present from Advisory Committee included Shawn Baker, Doug Smith, Madison Riley, Rani Elwy, Gail Sullivan, David Prock, Bill Schauffler, Pete Pedersen, Jenn Fallon, Christina Dougherty, Wendy Paul, Susan Clapham, Neal Goins, and Andrea Ward.

Shawn Baker, Chair, called the meeting to order at 6:30 pm and Doug Smith, Vice Chair, took roll call of Advisory members in attendance.

Citizen Speak

Rebecca Cahaly, 33 Wall Street – spoke about declining enrollment in the schools and the increasing costs, particularly administrative costs, citing that these positions do not interact with students. Outside consultants’ costs were also questioned. She also commented on “Standards-Based Grading,” stating this has been negative and cited inconsistent grading and confusion.

Article 40 – Dog license fees

KC Kato, Town Clerk, was present and provided information on Article 40 regarding increasing dog fees.

Questions

- Does anyone have difficulty paying the dog licensing fee and is there a way to contribute to help with that?
 - We have not seen that it is a hardship on owners.
- Is there a charge to the town for the on-line system?
 - The on-line system is part of Viewpoint cloud and is part of the building permit system. It was originally leased to support building permits and the dog licensing was piggybacked on that.
- A question was asked if the three (3) members need to recuse themselves on this vote due to election work.
 - This is a Select Board article and the Clerk’s office provides administrative support to the Animal Control Officer.

Wellesley Public School’s (WPS) FY24 Budget

School Committee (SC) members Leda Eizenberg (Chair) and Catherine Mirick were present. Ms. Eizenberg provided introductory remarks prior to the WPS FY24 budget presentation by School administration staff, which included David Lussier, Superintendent, WPS; Cindy Mahr, Assistant Superintendent of Finance; Sandra Trach, Assistant Superintendent, Teaching/Learning, Kat Bernklow, Director of Student Services; Monica Visco, Director of Human Resources; Megan Bounit, Director of Educational Technology.

Questions

- Is there funding to address the impact of COVID lockdowns and remote classes?
 - The response is imbedded in multiple places. Some examples include investment in adjustment counselors to provide more mental health services, as well as in math coaches and an additional math teacher at the Middle School. The district is deploying resources to meet needs that emerged during the pandemic.
 - The Middle School schedule has been adapted to provide core instruction and supplemental learning. ELA and Math are examples of this.

- Is there funding for the development of excellence in various subjects--such as the arts--that might include attendance at the Museum of Fine Arts; science and engineering, such as new techniques in improving the efficiency of energy consumption at the schools or just developing new applications of renewable technologies in our Town. Are there opportunities for students to participate in special projects such as assisting the elderly in accessing computer-based information systems or using the internet?
 - There are field trips in place where students receive visual arts enrichment. In addition, guest conductors and artists come into the schools. WPS has an amazing visual and performing arts program.
 - STEM work has been ongoing for a number of years with increased courses. There is innovative work occurring at all levels of the district. STEM has been a large priority for many years.
 - A STEM-themed event is planned for next fall.
- Do classes coordinate with small businesses in town where the student can learn about the real-world applications of their classroom work?
 - There are business classes at the high school where students create their own businesses, manage their own money, and learn about investments. The Launch program connects students with residency/internship programs in town. Seminar Day is another opportunity for high school students to learn from industry and business leaders.
- Are there courses in civics and American History for all levels of students?
 - As required by the state, there is a required civics course in the 8th grade; students develop action projects to learn about real governance.
 - Curriculum information is available on the WPS website.
- A comment was made that it was felt that the teachers should be given a raise commensurate to the impact of inflation. It was felt that teachers should be given a 5% raise plus 3% in an escrow account for the best performing teachers.
 - WPS cannot comment on contract negotiations as it might jeopardize those negotiations.
- A question was asked about the new “Millionaire’s Tax” on incomes over \$1 million that was to bring in an estimated \$1 billion to Massachusetts; some of this revenue was to go to education. Has WPS heard anything from the state about that money? Could it offset the 14% mandated increase in Special Education?
 - WPS has not heard about it yet. The district’s primary source of funding is Chapter 70; this money flows directly from the state to the town and not directly to the district.
- Are the estimates low for savings when hiring new? How is the dollar savings determined when a teacher is lost or added?
 - The district strives to find a balance. The best candidate is sought and is not always the most expensive. Staff are encouraged to hire younger teachers who are earlier in their careers and come in at a lower salary range because they often stay to continue their careers with the district.
- A request was made for information on the budget pressures and to identify within the \$3 million increase the non-discretionary items and the discretionary items and the positions being added.
- A comment was made that it would be helpful to put the annual budgets on the enrollment chart as a visual display of where we stand and whether the budget increases are normal, even with declining enrollment.
- A comment was made that there appears to be a trend towards administrative positions over educational positions.
- A question was asked about the purpose of the Melwood Global contract; the questioner felt that it is important to focus on transparency and not on “storytelling.”
 - This is to address the community’s request for more community engagement and connections. Melwood Global’s role is not to be a PR firm or a storyteller but more of a

partner in the thought process on helping the district to be more effective in communicating. Melwood was brought in to help with the work around the strategic plan and to help the district think about a more effective communication strategy and opportunities for public engagement.

- As a community, the district is constantly talking and trying to be transparent. But the district is aware of the need to do a better job of communicating. Having this firm for a year will help us develop a strategy and then in the long-term develop plans to help the district better engage with the community.
- Has the district heard if the WPS budget will be split out from the rest of the town budget?
 - The district has not heard anything.
- Given the concern last year about the drop in rankings of WPS, is there an update on the rankings this year?
 - The one most often cited is the US News which is updated around the time of Town Meeting. The rankings have never been a driver for WPS. Given how the methodology changes, the algorithm can change a ranking from one year to the next.
- A comment was made that a number of schools, such as Harvard, are dropping out of the rankings process.
- Do you update the budget book to reflect the contracts when they are signed?
 - An adjusted budget is presented in the fall, and assumptions are built into the FY24 budget request.
- Has there been any discussion about security costs such as camera systems and electronic devices; is there any additional investment in the security area?
 - Security is a prominent consideration and the decision to upgrade is based on prior practices. The district has hired external consultants several times over the past decade. The district created a security template that has been deployed across the district. When the high school was built, it had some of the security features around door locks and video cameras. The district also worked with the police on security while being sensitive to introducing surveillance at the schools. For example, security cameras are not located in classrooms but in hallways, areas of egress, or other sensitive internal and external spaces.
 - The actual equipment is in the FMD budget. The systems behind it, such as the software, are a school cost.
- Is this a new area for the technology budget?
 - In partnership with FMD, the district is really thinking how those systems are upgraded.
 - Security also has many non-material costs in terms of actual practices. For example, lockdowns and the protocols that are in place are evaluated by the district across all schools every year, in collaboration with the police department.
 - The district feels that mental health is one of the most important features of security; knowing the students well and when they are in crisis is an important part of school security. The debriefs around some of the tragedies elsewhere in the country are also important; the district tries to learn from those and identify if something was missed.
 - There is a human side of security that the district thinks is even more important than some of the fiscal aspects.
- A comment was made that perhaps the time spent on security might be an indirect factor in the increasing costs.
- Is the increase in positions directly related to specific strategic initiatives?
 - The increase is the result of taking into account the net positions, adds and deletes.
- Is there any concern about the balances in the revolving funds decreasing?
 - Each revolving fund has a specific purpose and the revenue collected must be spent in the manner in which the revenue is collected.

- Two years ago, a rating schedule was established to determine if a fund balance was too high; each fund has a grade associated with it that assesses the average earnings over the last few years in comparison to what the operating expenses have been.
- The revolving funds are the accounts in which the School Committee is allowed to maintain a balance from year to year. Any balance in the general fund is returned to the town.
- The district is trying to minimize fees, so that will impact the bottom line. But it was felt there is no critical risk now. The district can manage the funds that might be low with budget offsets and reviews on a regular basis.
- A comment was made about the steady increase in wealthy kids going to private schools or not going to WPS; the current rate is now 25%. Is there any information in terms of demographics that can be provided, and does the district think this trend will continue?
 - In the first summer of the pandemic in 2020, the district did not know its schedule. Therefore, a number of families, particularly in the primary grades, chose private schools because they knew the schedule. The district ultimately began with a hybrid schedule for many students. Many of those families and students had a good year and made friends in private schools, so many of those kids did not come back.
 - But that private school drop does not explain the full drop in enrollment. The district has fewer births. Also, the cost of homes in the district affects families moving to the area; some families might have new options to work remotely in the Metro West and Boston areas and can live less expensively a bit further out.
 - With opening of “The Nines,” the district has seen a significant increase in students; over 30 students have come from The Nines in its first year.
- A comment was made that it is understood that the special education costs are mandated and that there is not much local control over those costs. Are there any legislative solutions that might help with the special education burden for Wellesley and other schools?
 - Wellesley and peer communities have asked that question. In two (2) years, we might see an increase in the circuit breaker for a higher reimbursement, but the district must budget for the first and second year before receiving reimbursement. It was felt that the state is trying to stabilize some of the service providers on whom the district relies to provide for services that the district cannot provide. However, it is problematic from a budget perspective.
- A comment was made that a list of questions was submitted to School Committee.
- It was agreed that the questions should be submitted through the school liaisons and answers would be provided if possible.
- Why did expenses go up so much across all areas of the budget?
 - One reason is that during the pandemic the district needed double the number of classes so students were six (6) feet apart. The district needed to hire more teachers to teach this increase in the number of classes. The district also started an entirely separate, remote learning school with its own principal and supports for approximately 500 students engaged remotely.
 - Operation increases are related to the district’s transportation increases, which are contractual year to year.
 - Student services expenses are directly related to the students in school today, including out-of-district placements and the staff intensive in-district programming. The second largest employee group in the district is Unit C, which includes the staff that support student services. The cost of student services is driven by students from Wellesley and their individualized education programs (IEPs); the IEP is the legal document stating what a student needs. This need can sometimes be a one-to-one paraprofessional. It can

be technology that a student needs to communicate. These are not discretionary expenses.

- A comment was made that it sounds like this is tied to enrollment. Therefore, if enrollment is declining, why is this number rising? Why is this one line increasing out of proportion?
 - Those do not necessarily run parallel. For example, outside student services, there could be a drop in enrollment of 100 students but that could be over 100 classes, so there would be no change in staffing. The net number of students can be decreasing, but the expense for the existing students continues to increase, which creates more costs.
- A request was made to look at the drivers for the multi-year increase in expenses.
 - It was suggested that budget presentations for the past years be reviewed to determine this.
- What is the difference between the \$87 million and roughly \$137 million?
 - The \$87 million is the district's general operating budget which is the budget that goes before Town Meeting. The district has other funding sources that are put in the budget document in the funding summary. It also includes town support for the schools, such as police for the crossing guards and HR for health benefits. All this information will be on the new budget document that will be online tomorrow.
- A question was asked about the future losses being projected.
 - This is meant for planning purposes. The town does a great job of providing a future look and the district is trying to do a similar view based on feedback received. The deficit is the amount of money over the 3% guideline.
 - The district makes assumptions regarding revenue and expenses. The district looks at enrollment, sectioning, the needs for curriculum development and professional development. As was mentioned previously, there was a position that the district did not go forward with this year but it will be discussed next year and is in next year's projections. The district looked at cash capital and based off of the technology replacement schedule, numbers for 2027 and 2028 are projected. Finally, the district does not know what Chapter 70 reimbursement this year will be. It is assumed to be level-funded. The version of the budget posted tomorrow will identify the assumptions.
- What does the deficit mean?
 - The deficit is not 100% driven by the general fund. In some cases it is the unknown future funds. The district projects a level service of federal funds. Those can increase or decrease over time. The district looks to the future to see what adjustments can be made now, so that there is not a \$3 million deficit. These are on-going discussions.
- A question was asked as to why students are asked to bring in supplies such as pencils and Kleenex? It was felt that this could be a struggle for families in need.
 - The district's approach is no different than other school districts. Teachers like to have extra tissue, hand sanitizer, paper towels but these are not mandatory. All these are optional.
- A comment was made that philosophically these should be funded if it's something that is needed by the teachers; there is a request every year for pencils, pens, Kleenex, hand sanitizer.
 - Hand sanitizer is provided by FMD. In terms of school supplies, students like to make their own choices. But general supplies like pens, pencils, Kleenex are provided. Sometimes teachers like having extra.
- Questions were asked about enrollment and the enrollment chart. Are these declines exclusive to Wellesley and what caused the decline in the 1990s?
 - It is a demographic dip, and it is related to the sizes of various generations.
- Is there information to support this?
 - The Massachusetts state census or the Wellesley town census over the years will show similar numbers.

- There was a lengthy discussion on where and how to find this data and if it could be provided.
- Concern was expressed about the declining enrollment and increasing costs.
 - The FutureThink presentations will help with the understanding of enrollment trends.
 - When there are more graduating seniors than kindergartners coming in, the overall enrollment shrinks as those classes move through the system.
- A request was made for the number of students going to private school.
 - Those numbers are in the FutureThink presentation. It was 20 to 21% before the pandemic and it is now 24%. Many of the youngest students left because their parents needed the childcare; they went to private school at the start of the pandemic, and they did not return because they were having a good experience. If families are happy and can continue to pay, then they are staying.
- What is the justification for increasing administrative costs?
 - In general, the district's staffing costs do not run parallel with student enrollment, whether it's classroom teachers or fixed positions. The overhead costs to administer the system don't really change. The district needs additional bandwidth to support the types of needs that are emerging with some students. The costs to manage the whole system are not correlated perfectly with what the overall enrollment.
- Specific positions were questioned and whether these positions were tied to student needs.
 - The community has told the district that it wants to see more opportunities for engagement, communication, coordination, so that need exists regardless of student enrollment.
 - The district is trying to be responsive to the need to meet open records requests, as this is a new category for districts everywhere. Although the public records system has been used for legitimate interest, there are examples of it being used to harass the district and other districts, with redundant, frivolous requests. Staffing a position to meet the requests is a real need, not just for Wellesley, but for many districts to be responsive to the requests.
 - The public records position will also support payroll duties. The district combined the need for additional payroll support with the need to meet public record requests into one position.
- A question was asked about consultants and who the companies are, their purpose, and cost.
 - The district might have a consultant that handles information technology security. The district has a number of consultants that work directly with students around mental health services and testing. Some are operational, some are educational, and some are student-facing.
- There was a lengthy discussion about the type of data that is being requested and what is available and can be provided by the district.
- How does Wellesley compare to other towns for employees in Unit C or is this more difficult to compare because of the part-time or fewer hours?
 - These positions are structured differently across towns, whether it's the hours or responsibilities, so it is hard to compare. However, the district knows that the opening rates listed are extremely competitive with peer communities; that is not a complete picture in total compensation. The bottom line is that the district would like to attract and retain highly qualified staff, and the district is in a very competitive marketplace in Metro West and Boston and is competing for talent.
 - It was recognized that there is a great amount of interest around the pay schedules and working conditions for Unit C staff; many aides and paraprofessionals are waiting for teaching positions, or the schedule works for them because they have been teachers in the past. They support staff each day. The district is hopeful that those salary rates remain competitive among peer communities.

- Is there a cap on the step increase and COLA increase?
 - There is no cap; it's whatever is negotiated and reflected in the collective bargaining agreement. Just under half of the district's staff is moving on steps. Those at the top of the steps only receive COLA.
 - Most of the costs are non-discretionary because compensation is defined through collective bargaining agreements.
- Will the reduction in bus fees increase the bus use? Are there other programs that will help get more people on the buses?
 - Transportation is one of the survey questions on the strategic plan survey. The district would like feedback on the rates. The district sees redistricting and the reduction from seven (7) schools to six (6) schools as an opportunity to encourage more students to ride the bus.
- A clarifying question was asked about the 14% out of district (OOD) rate increase and whether this is expected for FY25 and FY26.
 - The district does not anticipate another 14% next fiscal year. There was an explanation of how the rate was calculated this year.
- Is the role of the recruitment/development diversity specialist in the budget? And if it is in the budget, how is it different than the current director of diversity, equity, and inclusion
 - It is not in the budget this year. The School Committee recognized the need but felt by waiting a year, the district would be in a better position to bring this position forward in a different context. The need is extremely acute.
 - There is a need to diversify the workforce as it is not as diverse as the student population. The district has a new partnership with Regis College. Fewer people are considering a path in public education as a career, particularly following the pandemic. The district wants to make sure it is recruiting, developing, and retaining staff of color.
 - The DE&I director is working broadly around training and professional development and supporting staff. The district would like to have someone focused on the workforce issues of developing those partnerships and working with HR on recruitment and onboarding. But this position is not in the current budget proposal.
- A comment was made that Advisory has been receiving many letters from teachers. What is the profile of Unit C employees and where they are in their careers?
 - The profile can vary. It includes recent college graduates who are thinking about a career in education to someone who is looking to get some experience while working on a graduate degree. It is a six and a half (6 ½) hours per day, nine (9) months per year position. It is very attractive to someone who might hope to parlay their connection with WPS into a full-time teaching position, either in Wellesley or in another district. There are also people who have been working for the district for a long time as well as former teachers and retirees.
- Can you provide more information about the fellows program? How many fellows are there and what is the budgetary impact? Are they paid as regular teachers? Is there mentoring or supervision?
 - The district would like to create five (5) teaching fellow positions in collaboration with Regis College at a cost of \$10,500 per fellow; the fellows would teach with the district for one school year and would receive a tuition reduction over a two (2) year graduate program. If the program is successful, it is anticipated that it would be brought forward to continue for the second year.
 - This can provide a new teaching candidate with in-classroom experience. The fellows will not be part of the collective bargaining agreement.
- Are the fellows being supervised or mentored by Regis professors or by Wellesley teachers and are those teachers receiving any kind of compensation for this?

- The fellows are supervised by both. Currently teachers in Wellesley do not receive additional compensation for having a student teacher. Although it is a responsibility, the district's teachers have done this with open arms.
- Has there been feedback on the long-term substitutes; how is this working, and does it provide the coverage and cost savings which were hoped for?
 - The district has hired the long-term building-based substitutes and they have been a tremendous help. The district continues to average about 35 teacher absences per day. It continues to be challenging to cover the absences, which are still higher than they were pre-Covid. The building substitutes have been the first line of defense. Given the continued high absence rate, there have not been cost savings. Although the substitute costs are up, they would have been significantly more without the building substitutes.
- Does the district anticipate impacts to the budget in May when the public health emergency ends since there were many things built into a public health emergency from which organizations benefited?
 - There are many unknowns. The district benefited from state, federal, and private resources to augment the budget. The district's COVID response was described.
- A comment was made that for almost three (3) years, many organizations received money that has become part of their day-to-day operating budgets and in May this is ending.
- A comment was made that it is a source of pride that the Wellesley school system and town make decisions about special education based on the needs of children and families and not on costs. When Wellesley is compared to other towns, it is unknown how decisions are made in other towns. But how decisions are made in Wellesley is known. The 14% increase is a shock to the budget, but the district has looked at what the actual needs are. It was further commented that it is always more cost-effective to provide services in-house in our own school system as opposed to out of district, but sometimes that is what a student needs.
- A comment was made commending the district's efforts on communication strategies. It was felt that the term "storytelling" doesn't mean fiction storytelling. Rather it is a way of relating to people. The district is investing in services to support storytelling but it is not to create a fictional aspect of what is happening in schools or town, or anywhere else. It was felt that when people express concern about communication, it is because they are not able to relate to what is happening; they don't know how it impacts them; and they don't feel like they are being heard. It was felt that storytelling is great. In the future the budget impact and results can be evaluated.
- A comment was made that the school liaisons have been working very hard with the School Committee and WPS to get answers to all questions. Advisory members were encouraged to reach out to the school liaisons with additional questions.
- A question was asked about the district's cybersecurity efforts.
 - The technology department will be writing the technology plan alongside the strategic plan. One of the focuses will be on cybersecurity. The department is in the process of writing a data governance plan and security plan for the department and is looking at everything.
- A question was asked if the district had been involved with The Nines and the changes there with the additional 250 housing units?
- Why does the district use private placement versus collaborative, although it is understood that it's important to take care of the students' needs?
 - The collaborative programs are high-quality programs in other districts. If a student is sent to a collaborative program, it could be a step down for some of the students, so they are kept in-district. If a student needs something more, it would be a more intense intervention at a private school.
- Where would cuts be made to meet the budget guideline? Town Meeting will want to know this.

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- The message from the town is that this budget can be absorbed by the town, even though it is above guideline because they understand the reason. In prior years, there has been a give and take with the town about where the district can make reductions. The district has not received the direction from the town to identify reductions to get to guideline. The district informed the town early about the impact of the 14% increase. As the conversation evolves, the district will evolve with it.
- There was a lengthy conversation about enrollment and the budget and if there were any insights into the drop in birth rates and families moving out of Wellesley.
 - The pandemic caused some families to leave and not return.
 - The FutureThink presentation in the fall covers enrollment.
- Is there something unique to Wellesley that people go to private schools as compared to neighboring towns and what are the percentages in those town? Was there a consistent drop during the pandemic from the public schools and an increase into private schools?
- A comment was made that the smaller environment of private schools allows them to control things differently and keep kids in the classroom.
 - The [Massachusetts DESE School Attending Report](#) shows every town in Massachusetts and the percentage of students who go to public schools.
- A comment was made that there is not going to be a perfect correlation in the drop in sections with enrollment as has been explained before.
- A comment was made about the decrease in the transportation costs and that it is a heavily subsidized number already; moving toward full subsidization is the district's goal. Perhaps there are some other transportation funds in town that could be utilized to support the district's transportation costs.

Administrative

- There was a discussion about Advisory's deliberating and voting process.

Minutes Approval

Jenn Fallon made, and Bill Schauffler seconded a motion to approve the February 1, 2023, minutes and adjourn the meeting.

February 1, 2023, minutes, were unanimously approved, 13 to 0 and the meeting was adjourned at 10:30 pm.

Meeting Documents

<https://www.wellesleyma.gov/DocumentCenter/Index/1985>

- 2023 ATM Dog Licensing Fee
- FY24 WPS Advisory Budget Presentation (2_8_23)